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Body Image: Ending the Body Check Game

In a society dominated by media and cultural messages that dictate ideal body size and shape, it can be difficult to develop and maintain a positive body image. Research even indicates that *attractive* people obtain better social standing and success than *unattractive* people. Some of these biases include social popularity, academic success, employment benefits, higher pay and even legal leniency (Fox, 1997-2012). In many cultures, a type of “normative discontent” develops, where it becomes a standard to criticize one’s body as not living up to the cultural ideal. Studies also suggest that a negative body image is associated with the development of disordered eating, low self-esteem, and depression (Swami, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2012). In particular, college freshmen are more “vulnerable” and “impressionable” (Leone, Spr 2011) than other age groups, and are at risk for decreased satisfaction with body image and size#. In addition, among this age group, the increased concern about gaining the “freshman 15” has been shown to increase the likelihood of disordered eating behavior development (Delinsky, 2008). In response to these growing concerns we decided to develop a theory-based nutrition education intervention program aimed at increasing positive body image among college freshmen.

Analysis of Needs and Behaviors

Twenty three college freshmen were recruited from a dining hall on The California State University, Chico campus and asked to fill out a survey on body image. Participants included 14 males and 9 females, with a mean age between 18 and 19 years old. The survey covered general topics including self-image related to societal pressure, nutritional intake, self-acceptance, barriers to a positive body image, and motivators for change. We included Likert scales with questions such as “I compare my body to others” and “I feel that I will never live up to society’s ideal body image”. Participants ranked their answers from always, sometimes, rarely, or never. Results from the survey were entered into SPSS for data analysis. Relevant results were as follows: 72.7% of participants reported a need to have control over body weight, 78.2% compare their bodies to others. Borderline results included that only half of participants were aware that they feel uncomfortable with their body and worry how others view their body. In general, both males and females felt a lack of control over how they feel about their bodies, with males stating they have slightly less control. Limitations include that the students were eating in close proximity to their peers in a public setting while completing the survey. Additional limitations include small sample size, lack of control for confounding factors (no randomization), lack of control subjects, and biased selection processes of the surveyor. Further, we began this project under the assumption that college freshmen have body issues and that these issues are incorrect. These results led us to the conclusion that the majority of participants have issues with the need to control their body image and are comparing themselves to others often, but that they have a low general awareness that this is a destructive behavior and that there is a need for change. These findings are in keeping with “normative discontent” with body image, the cultural phenomenon of criticizing one’s body in relation to others’ (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984).

In response to our findings, we chose the Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change as it is representative of the both the stages and processes of change. From our surveys, we concluded that our target audience tends to fall into the *precontemplation* stage as they have limited to no awareness that their negative body images are unhealthy and do not believe that change is necessary. Through our intervention, we will use the stages of change to guide our participants towards a goal of contemplation and eventually, action. The various constructs and intervention methods are presented below:

Behavior Theory

In response to our findings, we chose the Transtheoretical Model as it is representative of the both the stages and processes of change. The various constructs and intervention methods are presented below:

Process of Change	Construct	Intervention Motive	Intervention Method
Precontemplation	Consciousness Raising	Comparing yourself to others is unhealthy	Discuss statistics of body checkers and eating disorders/ depression, etc. and the negative effects of this low self-esteem causing habit
Precontemplation	Dramatic Relief	When comparing yourself to others it makes you feel unhappy(overview of risks)	Perform a skit of how quickly body checking can happen with the train of thoughts that follow
Contemplation	Environmental Reevaluation	When I compare myself to others, how does it affect you and the person you are comparing yourself to?	Allow participants to break into groups and confess their own personal experiences with body checking
Contemplation	Self-Reevaluation	What are my beliefs, knowledge, behaviors around body image?	Q&A about what each person thinks is the "ideal body type". Show pictures of women of normal and underweight BMI and see which body type people think is normal
Contemplation	Social-liberation	Does my body image affect my dietary behaviors? Do I eat or drink differently if I know someone is watching me? Do I judge others based on how or what they eat?	Have participants reflect and write down 1 positive thing about their own body and 1 about their personality
Action/Maintenance	Counterconditioning	When I notice that I am body-checking which involves comparing myself to others and judging myself to others. How can I change this behavior or self-talk to think positive statements	Change negative to positive self-talk
Action/Maintenance	Helping Relationships	Can I trust that the relationships I have are going to be helpful to support a positive mind and body? Do I have many friends who are constantly putting me or others down based on their body?	Practice saying positive remarks to friends or peers who compare or judge others

Process of Change	Construct	Intervention Motive	Intervention Method
Action/Maintenance	Reinforcement Management	By building others up, I can feel more confident and proud of myself	Turn to a neighbor and compliment 3 things about them. Feel the confidence in yourself as benefit to complimenting others
Action/Maintenance	Self-Liberation/Commitment	Believe that we can view ourselves apart from others.	Challenge: practice catching yourself body-checking or putting yourself down and change those thoughts to focusing on how unique and special you are
Action/Maintenance	Stimulus Control	Fortune Cookie Quote on your mirror.	Challenge: tape your fortune to your mirror, binder, dashboard, etc. as a reminder to accept and love yourself as you are!

Educational Objectives

Main Goal: Participants will have increased awareness of body judgement and comparison behaviors.

Objective 1: Participants will experience a raise in consciousness by learning why body comparison is an unhealthy behavior.

Objective 2: Participants will practice counterconditioning techniques as they change negative thoughts about body image to body-positive self-talk.

Objective 3: Participants will have increased self-liberation from normative discontent.

Specific Learning Objectives:

Students will be aware of body checking: College freshman will be able to identify when body checking is happening and that it is unhealthy.

Students are able to change negative to positive body talk: College Freshman will be able to identify negative body talk and transform it to a positive affirmation.

Students are educated on body image trends: College freshman will identify trends of how body image is portrayed by the media and society in general throughout history.

Students practice body modification during the month of April: College freshman will be able to utilize at least 3 body positive techniques, as illustrated on the calendar handout, to improve overall body image.

Theory-based educational strategies

The various components of our presentation are organized in an intervention format. The intervention starts by taking into account that college freshman are in the Precontemplation stage of change. To move from Precontemplation into contemplation we will present an activity involving a skit that raises consciousness of what body checking is and also how common it is in a public setting. In addition, the skit will utilize dramatic relief showing that comparing yourself to others will ultimately create negative body talk. We will then discuss why and how negative body image is unhealthy in order to increase the perceived threat of not changing the behavior.

After the audience has gained increased awareness of the problems that result from habitual body checking they will be better prepared to move into the stage of contemplation. This will start with an environmental reevaluation in which they reflect on their individual experiences with body checking. This will bring awareness to how comparing body types will create a negative body image. A body image timeline and BMI chart will be provided as visual stimulation that increases awareness of the influence of media on body image. This will hopefully encourage self-reevaluation, where participants can reassess where their negative self-talk originated. The timeline will identify the evolution of body portrayal in the media and society throughout history. The pictures of different BMI body types will not fit participants

into another category, but instead demonstrate that there is no such thing as “normal body size”. To personalize the experience, two stories will be told about struggles with the “normal body image”.

To transition from contemplation to action and maintenance stages, we will begin with key points of a positive body image, itself. We will present three helpful tips that reflect specific constructs to promote the intervention. Tip one will use counterconditioning to turn negative self-talk to positive, by enabling appreciation for the body for all of its physical functions in contrast to its superficial ones. Tip two will allow for self-liberation by evaluating how the individuals’ specific self-image can change encouraging that change is possible. In this activity, participants will reflect and write down one part of their body they are unhappy with physically and then change this negative talk to one positive function of the body part . We will ask participants to share thoughts and ideas to encourage helping relationships in the action phase and create a safe environment for the change to occur. Tip three will encourage freedom from social norms by promoting healthy helping relationships. We will demonstrate building others up instead of putting them down as a mechanism to compensate for personal insecurities. It will also reinforce self-liberation by reviewing awareness of body checking behavior and choosing to focus on unique and beautiful characteristics of every individual. To solidify our processes of change and encourage action and maintenance in the future, we will give out fortune cookies that contain positive body affirmations. The fortune will be cue to action by being taped to an item that is used daily as a reminder to accept and love yourself as you are.

6. Evaluation

1. Can you identify what a body check is? (yes/no)
2. Did you come up with one positive characteristics of yourself? (yes/no)
3. Can you identify a body image trend from the media? (yes/no)
4. Do you plan to use the Body Positive Calendar for April? (yes/no)
5. Did you find a place to tape your affirmation? (yes/no)
6. Has your awareness of a positive body image increased from this presentation? (yes/no)
7. Are you able to take a negative body image thought and turn it into a positive thought? (yes/no)
8. Do you have the ability to create a more positive body image for yourself and others? (yes/no)
9. Can you help others to decrease judgmental comments on others? (yes/no)
10. After practicing positive body image techniques will you be able to stop letting the media and others influence how you feel about yourself? (yes/no)

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